

A Father's Day Triptych by petersfeather

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: AGAIN I yell back!!, AGAIN you ask??, Angst, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, F/M, Father's Day, Fluff, Found Family, Good Parent Jim "Chief" Hopper, Harringrove, Harringrove dads!, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, M/M, Pain, Parental Jim "Chief" Hopper, Past Child Abuse, Sorta kinda, all I can do is dive into Billy's past and what made him the way that he is, at the very end, but they hardly speak, child OCs i guess, child fic, emotional analysis, idk what the manners are for tagging characters, it's all i can do, uh Max El and Joyce are also in this, what do you want from me

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Billy Hargrove's Mother, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-06-21

Updated: 2021-06-21

Packaged: 2022-03-31 13:54:22

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 3,558

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

A short piece following Billy growing up and coming to terms with what being a father really means to him, after struggling over it his whole life.

A Father's Day Triptych

Author's Note:

Happy belated Father's day.

I've got a rough relationship with my own parents and I couldn't let Father's day pass without thinking of my emotional support rat child. This is just a short bit diving into how Billy might feel about Father's days he's had.

The title *isn't* from a song this time, are we all shocked????? :O

Father's day in the Hargrove household was always pulled taut with expectations of kindness and submission hanging over Billy's head.

It didn't always used to be that way. When he was a kid, Father's days felt like a reprieve rather than a burden. Billy and his mom would prepare special things- a nice card that would make him laugh, those new fishing poles he'd been eyeing in the big sporting store a town over, a pretty cake with fresh fruit on top from the grocer down the way. His mother went all out. She'd get Billy all excited for it too. The strenuous relationships were softened for a day where they did everything they could to make him happy.

They really did... *everything* they could just to make him happy. Sometimes Billy still wonders why it had to take so much.

Around Father's day, his mother would use all her spending money to make his father smile. It usually worked. And for that day, it was so good. It could hardly get better. Grilling and watching stupid baseball games Billy never cared about but would pretend to be interested in, just for him. Fake smiles almost became real. Hot dogs and hamburgers and watermelon always tasted better on those days when his father would put his arm around Billy amicably- when he would laugh at the card and compliment how Billy's penmanship was getting better every year.

The year that she left was the worst.

The year that she left Billy stopped getting an allowance. He had no money to soften the edges of his father with fresh cakes and fancy presents. He panicked. He stole a stupid fishing keychain from a store and made a card from his school notebook paper. He presented them with shaking hands to his father who seemed glued to the couch, eyes bloodshot, surrounded by beer cans, baseball game so loud Billy's ears felt sore.

He got a grunt and a lazy eye roll in response. A slurred groan of "your writing is sloppy". A quieter admission of regret.

He got resentment. Billy was 9 and he knew it was resentment towards his very existence. He slid away to his room. There was no dinner to eat that night as his father passed out on the couch with the TV still on far too loud.

When Susan and Max came into the picture, Billy miraculously found a reason to be happy for it. Suddenly there was pressure taken off of him. He let Max know it too, as Susan encouraged them to go out and "at least get him a card". They'd lazily look through all the forcibly funny and generic pieces of paper. Max was nervous that first year.

"It's whatever." Billy had grunted, looking through ugly green cards with stupid phrases on them. "She's gonna bang him tonight, he won't care about a dumb card."

"Ew." Max had whined, covering her ears and pouting. Billy couldn't find it in himself to care.

It was never fun. Billy felt like he was on a leash all day long, obligated to do everything he could for his father just to keep him civil. Susan made a steak, the kids handed over the card, his father remarked how his penmanship was the mark of someone lazy and sloppy (no matter how hard Billy would try to make it as neat as he possibly could), and the day would end. And he could stop thinking about how this man still had a hand in his life.

...

Father's day in the Hopper household was always bumbling and awkward.

By the time that first one came around, Billy was just beginning to feel less like a burden to the house and more like an addition. He'd found comfort in the space they all shared. They had a sort of routine set between all of them. There was still no second bed for Billy, so he still felt like he was imposing when Hop slept on the couch, but it was a sort of pull out couch by that point and Hop insisted and Billy decided not to pay it too much mind.

And that first Father's day was just... *awkward*. Billy had completely forgotten the date- summer had just started for him and days were rolling by in hot and languid and lazy moments of feeling out every new situation. He had just started getting really *serious* with Steve. Not just touching for the sake of getting off but really starting to need and want each other in ways that scared him. In ways that made him want to keep things how they were- ways that made him scared to change a thing. It was a new and alien feeling for him.

El had inadvertently learned about Father's day from Mike when he briefly groaned about dinner plans his family had. Billy found that out from El on their drive to the store to pick something up for Hop. She had to convince Billy it was a thing they should do, because Hopper was their father. He did fatherly things for them. He took them in and gave them a roof and food and asked how their days were and wished them goodnight and good morning, however groggily. He made stupid jokes that made them moan and he danced horribly to the old records he kept on their dusty shelf and he was horrible with laundry and he whistled as he did dishes.

He introduced Billy proudly in the grocery store once. It was the weekend after Billy had a really good basketball game that Hop had decided to attend. Hop bragged about it to some friend of his. Billy flushed red and elbowed him and tried his best to escape.

He thought about it every single day.

Billy and El bought a large cheesy balloon, ingredients to make a nice lasagna dinner, and a green and white cake from the bakery. The balloon was more for El. The lasagna was a little burnt. Hop was too

nice to say he'd have preferred pie to cake, but he ate it anyway as they sat around the TV and watched whatever program was on. Billy only remembered as he fell slowly into sleep that night. He jolted awake quickly, remembering a sort of far off conversation months ago where Hop had proclaimed confidently that pie was the superior dessert of anything else- yes, even Eggo's with whipped cream and sprinkles. How he admitted cake was never his favorite.

Billy felt shame overcome him as he remembered, pushing himself out of bed and turning to the sofa with the immediate want to apologize for it. He wasn't sure what came over him.

But instead of sending pleading apologies into the darkness, he just looked towards the sofa with a heavily beating heart and let his eyes adjust. And he thought about all that man had done for the two of them. Thought about how he took in these two stray kids. Thought about how he knew Hop was getting flack for it, because Billy heard the whispers and the snickers and the sneers about Hop running a dog pound. Thought about how he gave up his probably comfier trailer for the rundown cabin, gave up the main bedroom for the dusty spare bed, gave up the dusty spare bed for the couch, gave up parts of his *sanity* probably...

Billy didn't wanna apologize anymore. He just whispered a thanks, even though it was hard to push up through his throat and would fall onto sleeping ears.

The Father's days after that first one got better. They got Joyce, and along with her 2 boys that had their own rocky past with fathers and celebrations of them. Just four kids who feared and resented father figures. It ended up being better than Billy could imagine. It was never quite as awkward as that first Father's day, but never quite comfortable either. That being said, it was never a bad day. The bar was low, but that didn't matter. Billy found appreciation for the general ease all the same.

...

Father's day in the Hargrove-Harrington—"whatever we're together now and that's what's most important" household is filled with guilt and feelings of imposter syndrome.

They don't celebrate it the first two or so years after they've adopted their first child. He's just a toddler, he doesn't quite understand yet what it is. And they... they're still struggling with what it means to *be* fathers. They're confident in their rights but they're not immune to the judgmental voices, always eyeing them oddly when they're out together with their boy or asking after the mother when they're out separately. Always looking a little judgmental or harsh when they have to explain why the kid doesn't look like them- whoever is with him at the time. Or getting looks of pity when the people clearly begin to assume it's because they couldn't get pregnant with whatever wife must be at home.

It's *hard* to hear. It makes them question everything. If their boy doesn't know what he's missing, then there's no need to explain.

Billy calls Hopper and feels his heart lurch when Hop and Joyce wish him and Steve a happy father's day. They do it with joy and certainty. As if it belongs to them, too. Billy hangs up the phone and lays in bed for at least half an hour. Steve can't get through to him.

It's an *odd* feeling. A rough feeling. When they adopt their second child, a girl of 9 years old, they know they're going to have to confront it. Their son begins school that year too. They find out about the day from their friends and television ads and store windows. The children are timid with them- they were adopted as supposed "problem children" from rough homes and tumultuous pasts. Billy and Steve don't expect *anything* of them but they're still not sure how to explain that. They figure ignoring is easier than explaining. Maybe it'll make it go away.

It doesn't work well.

And Billy... Billy's just struggling being a *dad*. He couldn't explain the job if he tried. He helps make lunches, he gives timeouts, he buys and subsequently sneaks himself some silly little snack foods when he's hungry and busy and doesn't have time to do more than rip open a pouch. He deals with tantrums over vegetables and he wipes mouths with napkins and he sings lullabies in the wrong key and he reads bedtime stories until he himself dozes off in the tiny bed with a small head on his chest and drool pooling onto his shirt.

He's *trying*. He gets frustrated at stores. He gets a little hot headed, a little loud. His heart breaks when they cry. He's straddling the line between being a pushover and a hard-ass. He lays awake at night, staring at the ceiling, dreading ever becoming like Neil. He asks Steve, in the stillness of the night when the darkness acts as the weight of every horrible outcome imaginable, if he'll follow Neil's wretched footsteps.

"You'll never be like him, Billy."

"How do you know? What if it's inside me already."

"It's *not*."

"Maybe it is... maybe I won't be able to help it."

He stresses and he struggles and he wants to rip his hair out.

But that first father's day comes around with their new daughter and newly knowledgeable son. And the two children blunder around the kitchen while their two dads are asleep. And then they wake the two parents up, both teary eyed and breathing heavy, faces full of apology and sorrow, asking for help to clean up the mess.

And Billy and Steve find the kitchen a single step back from full on disaster. There's juice all over the counter and dripping onto the floor, the cereal box is all soggy from it, the toaster is smoking, a plate is broken on the ground, the fridge is still open. Their daughter pulls on Billy's pajama pants and holds out her finger that's bleeding. He gets out of her that she somehow managed to cut it on the butter knife she was using to cut up some fruit.

Steve gets busy cleaning things up. He asks their son to help do smaller things like close the fridge and grab some towels.

Billy takes his daughter's small soft hand into his large, rough one and plants a kiss on it. It sends something like pure love surging through his heart. He guides her to the bathroom to put a bandaid on it and asks if she's okay.

"Mmhmm." She nods and his heart softens. She sniffles. "M'sorry. We wanted... wanted to make breakfast and w-wanted to do something

nice."

She sounds like the weight of the *world* is on her small shoulders. Billy sees himself at 9 years old, doing his damnedest to get anything close to a damn smile out of his father while he sat unresponsive and unamused on the couch.

His heart *yearns*. It breaks and it pulls and it screams and it shouts. He pulls her in close and hugs her tight and tries to find the right words. Tries to tell her it's made his entire *year*. It's made him feel validated and happy and *worth it*, like all of that stress is worth it just to know that these two children got up early as hell on a Sunday morning just to surprise their fathers. Just to surprise the two of them. Just to say they thought of them, wanted to give them something, wanted to make them feel special.

"It was nice." Is all he can croak out through his froggy throat.

"It's a *mess*." She sobs, but he just grips her arms tighter.

"It was *wonderful*." He says and he's crying too. He can't get the tears to stop. He's kneeling on the bathroom ground, the two of them crying to each other.

And Billy swears he'll never get good at the father thing. He has talks with Hop about it, when he's feeling vulnerable and Hopper's able to get it out of him. By this point they've adopted another child- an older boy, a teenager. He's rough and he's jaded. He listens to loud, angry music. He kind of picks on the other two kids, even though he'd jump in front of a bus for either one of them. Hop asks how he likes it.

"He's a lot like you were, y'know." Hop tells Billy, who still doesn't really see it.

Steve doesn't have as much of a problem with the boy as Billy does. Billy and him just never seem to see eye to eye.

"It's because you're the same people." Hop insists. Steve agrees. Joyce affirms with pity. "You clash."

They clash *hard*. They get into yelling matches. Billy never puts a

hand on him, but the arguments aren't exactly great. Billy cries to Steve at night, fear shaking him down to his core, still able to see and hear himself yelling at that boy who fights tooth and nail back with him.

"You're not a bad person, Billy."

"Why do I *do* that shit?" He asks, knowing full well no one but him could ever really know.

It's not like it's anything too vitriolic. It's not like it's anything really poisonous.

It's over the fact that he stays out too late at night, and Billy gets worried. It's the fact that Billy found cigarettes in his room and he knows the bad effects of cigarettes. It's the fact that he pushed his little brother one day and made him scrape his knee and he needed to learn some boundaries. It's the fact that he lied about his grades when Billy felt they gave him no reason to do such a thing.

It's *fatherly* things. That's what Hop assures him as Billy cries on the phone with him.

"It's things I would have done with you."

Billy never *ever* knows what to make of that. What to make of what he'd be like now if Hop was his father from the start. If Hop was there from the beginning. If Neil hadn't made him a monster in his own image.

Billy does his best to get through to him. Get through to his son now because he's his *son now*.

Billy feels like the worst, most undeserving father.

As the kids have gotten older, they learned better ways to celebrate father's day. They learn breakfast in bed isn't really what the two of them would prefer- a nice lunch and getting to spend some time with them sounds better. A homemade card always goes on the mantle or the fridge with the rest of the collection. A few hugs because those are like treasured gifts in this house with kids who have a history of boundary and trust issues with parental figures.

The older son catches Billy alone in the kitchen.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” Billy replies awkwardly back. The silence is jarring.

“I uh... uhm.” He’s struggling. Billy wants to do something more than just stand here, but he’s not sure what. He doesn’t want to push anything too far. He wants to be *good* at this.

The boy puts a small, wrapped box on the counter with an envelope underneath and slides it over.

“Happy Father’s day.” He mumbles, suddenly fidgeting.

Billy stares at them.

“You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to.”

There’s another pause, heavy with all the weight and worry in Billy’s heart. He reaches for the box, rips the paper open easily, lifts up the lid.

“It’s uh... it’s just a couple tapes of some of those... bands you like. And talk about. All the time.” The boy snickers, but it catches in his throat. He’s so nervous. “My friend’s family was getting rid of a bunch of their tapes and I know you’ve got your old tape player still so... uh... yeah.”

It’s a mixed bag of absolute classics. Some tapes he used to have, others he’s always wanted. Zeppelin, Ted Nugent, Def Leppard, Billy Idol, AC/DC, Alice Cooper... his heart skips. He lost a *lot* of his tapes after all the sudden moves he’s had to make. His eyes start to well.

“I... I don’t know what to say.” Billy pushes out on a whisper.

“Are they any good?”

“They’re... they’re *awesome*, kid.”

“There’s a card too y’know.” The boy adds, still shuffling nervously.

Billy slips it out from under the box, pulling his finger underneath the flap to open it.

It’s... it’s *ridiculous*. It’s one of the cheesiest cards Billy’s ever seen. He thinks back to all the stupid, jokey cards he used to pick out with his mother. The joke inside actually makes him *laugh*, loud and bright.

There’s words written underneath, quite a few scribbled out and then-

Sorry for all the trouble. I think I just don’t like knowing you’re right sometimes... but thank you for everything.

The words are nearly chicken scratch- wobbly letters clearly written with a nervous and shaky hand. The boy is damn near bouncing now, damn near trying to crawl out of his skin with nerves.

It’s the best, prettiest, most wonderful chicken scratch handwriting Billy has ever seen. He can barely see it now through his misty eyes.

“Your... handwriting is really nice.”

The boy scoffs loudly.

“Uh, thanks?” He sounds like he doesn’t believe it. Still, Billy could swear he sees the boy preen, just a little.

“Thank you.” Billy says, fighting back tears, trying like hell to hold himself together. “I’m sorry, too. I don’t... I don’t have to yell at you so much. At all. I’m sorry about it.”

The boy is just staring at him, eyes a little wide and a little shocked. Billy feels his heart lurch. He just wants to be fucking *good at this*.

“I’m gonna do better.” Billy asserts through a not-so-wobbly-anymore voice

The boy gives a small smile that grows a bit wider. If Billy isn’t absolutely crazy yet, he’d say that the boy’s eyes are getting a bit misty too.

“So are those tapes actually good?” The boy asks, clearing his throat and trying to seem casual. Billy sees more and more of himself in him.

“Hell yeah... do you think I’d have bad taste?”

His son cackles just a bit, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, alright then. Whatever you say.”

There’s a pause. Billy takes the card and tucks it back into the envelope to save for himself- to put in a special place in his and Steve’s room. He then busies himself with shuffling through his tapes before his son says-

“We can... listen to some of them. If you want.”

Billy’s eyes shine with excitement and appreciation.

Listening to the tapes together is *wonderful*. They rib each other about what songs are better, what voices do and don’t sound the same, what the lyrics are like. They learn more about each other and maybe Billy is finally forced to admit that they’re a lot more alike than he realized.

And Billy starts to feel that maybe... maybe he can finally define what a father really means to him. And father’s days start to feel a bit more like they belong to him, too.

Author's Note:

I was spurred to write this bc of Bruce Springsteen's stories about his own father. [Here's a couple of the performances](#) where he [talks about his rough relationship with his dad](#).

I'm on tumblr and sometimes I even post things. You can find posts I've made about these same children I mentioned in this fic. [@okaybutlikeimagine](#)

I hope you're all well, and I hope Father's day wasn't stressful or a burden on you. Fathers can be the most wonderful people in the world, they can also be

neglectful, they can also be absent, they can also be cruel. Either way, whatever your case may be, you're loved and appreciated all the same. ♥ Have a lovely day.